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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASTANA 000067

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [KDEM](#) [KZ](#)

SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: UNIFICATION CHURCH MISSIONARY SENTENCED TO
TWO YEARS IN JAIL

¶11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶12. (SBU) SUMMARY: On January 9, an Almaty court found Unification Church missionary Yelizaveta Drencheva guilty on charges of "instilling a sense of inferiority in citizens based on their tribal and social association," and sentenced her to two years in prison. Drencheva's lawyer and the Unification Church leadership ascribed the verdict to the government's broader campaign against non-traditional religious groups. Human Rights Bureau's director Evgeniy Zhovtis was outraged by the decision, calling Drencheva "Kazakhstan's first prisoner of conscience." END SUMMARY.

CASE BASED ON RELIGIOUS LECTURES

¶13. (U) On January 9, an Almaty court sentenced Unification Church missionary Yelizaveta Drencheva to two years in jail on charges of violating Article 164, Section 2, of the Kazakhstani Criminal Code, by "instilling a sense of inferiority in citizens based on their tribal and social associations." Drencheva, who is a citizen of Russia, was immediately taken into custody. Her lawyer, Berikan Idrisov, is appealing the ruling. The Secretary General of the Federation of the Unification Church Jacques Marion, who is based in Moscow but came to Almaty for the trial, said the Russian Embassy "was preparing a response to the ruling," but could not tell us anything more specific.

¶14. (U) The case stems from several religious lectures Drencheva gave in April 2008 to a group of Unification Church followers and guests.

The lectures, which were based on the teachings of Unification Church founder Reverend Sun Myung Moon, covered such topics as creation, original sin, and resurrection, and were surreptitiously taped by undercover agents from the Committee for National Security (KNB). The prosecution argued that by creating a distinction between those who devote themselves to the Unification Church, referred to by the Church as "complete persons," and those who do not, referred to as "incomplete persons," Drencheva's lectures effectively created a hierarchy of peoples and caused those who do not follow Church teachings to feel inferior.

¶15. (U) One of the undercover KNB agents who attended the lectures testified in court that they "had clear signs of propagating citizens' inferiority," and that he himself "felt inferior" after having listened to them. An expert witness for the prosecution, a Professor Burova, maintained further that the Unification Church's teaching that an "ideal family" is based on devotion to God

undermines the secular nature of marriage in Kazakhstan and "throws doubt on the process of socialization in our society." Burova argued that a person's identity is formed within the collective experience of society, and by throwing doubt on that collective understanding, Drencheva's teachings "could lead to full disintegration of a person's identity and loss of moral and social guideposts." Several experts for the defense testified that all religions make some sort of distinction between believers and non-believers, but the court apparently did not accept the validity of their arguments.

BROADER CAMPAIGN AGAINST SECTS

¶16. (SBU) Drencheva's attorney, Berikhan Idrisov, and the head of the Unification Church in Kazakhstan, Alma Dolgova, maintain that the trial was part of the government's campaign against non-traditional religious groups. This is the only way to explain why the government prosecuted Drencheva, they claim. The Church has been registered with the government since 1995 and has often invited Russian missionaries to come to Kazakhstan, but this is the first time they have encountered problems with the authorities. Idrisov expressed concern that Drencheva's guilty verdict will create grounds for prosecuting the whole church.

KAZAKHSTAN'S "WITCH HUNT"?

¶17. (SBU) Human Rights Bureau head Yevgeniy Zhovtis, Kazakhstan's most prominent civil society activist, was outraged by the verdict and termed Drencheva "Kazakhstan's first prisoner of conscience." "We are back to Soviet practices," he told us, arguing that this is the first time a person has been convicted purely on the basis of faith. He referred to the prosecution's expert witness, Professor Burova, as someone "who has spent all her life teaching scientific

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atheism and is clearly not aware that freedom of religion and consciousness is protected in Kazakhstan." Zhovtis contended that the court set a legal precedent by defining "tribal association" as membership in the human race and "social association" as membership in a family. In effect, Drencheva was tried for crimes against humanity, he contended, in a trial he called "a witch hunt" and a throwback "to the Middle Ages and the Inquisition." This ruling "seriously harms" Kazakhstan's international image and throws doubt on its commitment to basic human rights, argued Zhovtis.

¶18. (SBU) COMMENT: Drencheva was essentially convicted for teaching that her church provides the supreme path to human enlightenment -- which is something that many, if not most, religious groups maintain about themselves in some fashion or another. Her case thus provides a disturbing precedent that the government could deploy to go after other religious organizations, should it choose to do so. That said, this conviction is just the first round, and the appeals court may have a different take. END COMMENT.

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